



## Federal Update for July 15 - 19, 2013



### ***VA Announces \$300 Million in New Grants to Help End Veterans' Homelessness***

WASHINGTON (July 11, 2013) – Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki announced today the award of nearly \$300 million in grants that will help approximately 120,000 homeless and at-risk Veterans and their families. The grants have been awarded to 319 community agencies in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.

“With these grants, we are strengthening our partnership with community non-profits across the country to provide Veterans and their families with hope, a home, and a future,” said Shinseki. “The work of Supportive Services for Veteran Families program grantees has already helped us prevent and end homelessness among tens of thousands of homeless Veterans and their families, but as long as a single Veteran lives on our streets, we have work to do.”

Under the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program, VA is awarding grants to private non-profit organizations and consumer cooperatives that provide services to very low-income Veteran families living in -- or transitioning to -- permanent housing. The SSVF program supports VA's efforts to prevent at-risk Veterans from becoming homeless and rapidly re-house those who have recently fallen into homelessness.

Thanks to the SSVF grants, those community organizations will provide a range of services that promote housing stability and play a key role in connecting Veterans and their family members to VA services such as mental health care and other benefits. Community-based groups can offer temporary financial assistance on behalf of Veterans for rent payments, utility payments, security deposits and moving costs.

This is the third year SSVF grants have helped Veterans and their families find or remain in their homes. Last year, VA provided about \$100 million to assist approximately 50,000 Veterans and family members.

In 2009, President Obama and Secretary Shinseki announced the federal government's goal to end Veterans' homelessness in 2015. The grants are intended to help accomplish that goal. According to the 2012 Point-in-Time Estimates of Homelessness, homelessness among Veterans has declined 17.2 percent since 2009.

Through the homeless Veterans initiative, VA committed over \$1 billion in fiscal year 2013 to strengthen programs that prevent and end homelessness among Veterans. VA provides a range of services to homeless Veterans, including health care, job training, and education.

More information about VA's homeless programs is available at [www.va.gov/homeless](http://www.va.gov/homeless). Details about the Supportive Services for Veteran Families program are online at [www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf.asp](http://www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf.asp).

## ***VA Grants Will Expand Transportation in Highly Rural Areas***

WASHINGTON (July 10, 2013)– Veterans will have improved access to health care under a Department of Veterans Affairs initiative that supports new transportation services for those living in highly rural areas.

VA began accepting applications this month for grants to help state Veterans Service Agencies and Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) operate or contract for transportation services to transport Veterans to VA medical centers and other facilities that provide VA care. A new regulation establishes the program that will administer these grants. Transportation will be provided at no cost to Veterans.

“VA wants to be sure that all Veterans, including those who live in rural and remote areas, can receive the health care they have earned through service to our country,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. “State Veterans Agencies and VSOs will now be able to employ innovative approaches to

transportation services for Veterans in our highly rural areas. The end results will include better service and better health care for Veterans.”

VSOs and State Veterans Service Agencies may apply for grants up to \$50,000 to fund transportation of Veterans to and from VA medical centers and other facilities that provide VA care. If specified in the application, the services may be provided under agreements with contractors, such as private bus or van companies.

A highly rural area is defined as a county or counties with a population of fewer than seven persons per square mile. Many highly rural areas are found in the western and southwestern United States but at least half of the states have at least one highly rural area.

One of Secretary Shinseki’s top three priorities is increasing access to VA care and services for Veterans wherever they live. VA is expanding access in a three-pronged effort that includes facilities, programs and technology. Veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan are eligible for an extended period of eligibility for health care for 5 years after they have left the service.

## ***OEF/OIF Battlefield Action Records***

The U.S. Army has conceded a significant loss of records documenting battlefield action and other operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and has launched a global search to recover and consolidate field records from the wars. In an order to all commands and a separate letter to leaders of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Secretary of the Army John McHugh said the service also is taking immediate steps to clarify responsibility for wartime recordkeeping. The moves follow inquiries from the committee's leaders after a ProPublica and Seattle Times investigation last year reported that dozens of Army and National Guard units had lost or failed to keep required field records, in some cases impeding the ability of veterans to obtain disability benefits. The problem primarily affected the Army but also extended to U.S. Central Command in Iraq. McHugh, in his letter to committee leaders, said that while the Army had kept some of the required records, "we acknowledge that gaps exist." And in an enclosure responding to specific questions from the committee, McHugh confirmed that among the

missing records are nearly all those from the 82nd Airborne Division, which was deployed multiple times during the wars.

McHugh's letter was addressed to Chairman Jeff Miller (R-FL) and the panel's senior Democrat Michael Michaud of Maine, who said in an email 12 JUL that the records were of critical importance to veterans. "The admission that there are massive amounts of lost records is only the first step," Michaud said. "I appreciate the Army issuing orders to address this serious problem, but I'm concerned that it took a letter from Congress to make it happen ... Our veterans have given up so much for our country, and they deserve a complete record of their service for the sake of history as well as potential disability claims down the road." A call and an email to Miller were not returned. Maj. Chris Kasker, an Army spokesman, said McHugh was not available for further comment. In his order to Army commands, McHugh notes that units are required under federal law to keep field records, including "daily staff journals, situation reports, tactical operations center logs, command reports, (and) operational plans. In addition to providing support for health-related compensation claims, these documents will help capture this important period in Army history."

ProPublica and the Seattle Times uncovered assessments by the Army's Center of Military History showing that scores of units lacked adequate records. Others had wiped them off computer hard drives amid confusion about whether classified materials could be transferred home. In one 2010 report, investigators found infighting between the Army and U.S. Central Command over recordkeeping in Iraq and the failure to capture significant operational and historical materials in the theater. The missing records do not include personnel files and medical records, which are stored separately from the field records that detail day-to-day activities. McHugh's response to the congressmen said Army rules delegate recordkeeping responsibility to commanders at all levels, but they weren't always. "Although numerous directives have been issued to emphasize the importance of the preservation of records, directives unfortunately were often overcome by other operational priorities and not fully overseen by commanders. Steps are being taken now to make sure this does not happen again," the letter said.

McHugh's order launching an Army-wide search for records also shifts responsibility for maintaining them in a new central repository. Under regulations, individual units are charged with maintaining their records under the

direction of the Army's Records and Declassification Agency (RMDA), which archives some records but is not required to collect them. Separately, the Center of Military History sends trained historians into combat zones to collect materials to write the official history of the Army campaigns. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the historians found themselves becoming de facto archivists in combat, chasing down what field reports they could find. Their reports of missing or inadequate recordkeeping prompted alarms and complaints from military and civilian historians but little corrective action from Army brass. Emails obtained by ProPublica show that the Center of Military History and RMDA have long argued about which Army branch should be gathering different records. Now, McHugh's memo orders commands to send whatever they have to the Center, which is to assess what the Army does and does not have by Dec. 31. Calls to the Center for Military History were not returned. Officials at the National Organization of Veterans' Advocates, which had called on the Army to reconstruct missing field records, were not immediately available for comment. [Source: Sears & Stripes | Peter Sleeth | 12 Jul 2013 ++]

## ***NPRC Lost Records Update***

Forty years ago on 12 JUL, an enormous fire erupted at the National Personnel Records Center in suburban St. Louis. Burning uncontrollably for almost 24 hours, it destroyed some 16 million to 18 million military personnel records including official documents veterans need to apply for the benefits they've earned. Today, a team of about 30 people continues to put the pieces back together. They use the latest restoration techniques so reference technicians can gleam details from charred and water-damaged documents. "It's like a MASH [Mobile Army Surgical Hospital] unit," Marta O'Neill, who heads the National Personnel Records Center's Preservation Lab, said during a telephone interview. "There may be 15 different routes that a record could take so we can still preserve the information and get the benefits to the veteran."

The July 12, 1973, fire destroyed up to 80 percent of the 22 million records of veterans of the Army, Army Air Force and Air Force who served between 1912 and 1963, reported William Seibert, senior archivist and chief of archival operations at the National Archives in St. Louis. About 85 percent of the records of soldiers discharged between 1912 and 1959, including veterans of World War II and the Korean War, went up in smoke. In addition, about 75 percent of the

records of airman with last names beginning with "H" through "Z" who left service between 1947 and 1963 were lost. The true extent of the loss remains a mystery, because the center had no central registry of its holdings at the time, explained Seibert. Even if it was physically possible to reconstruct every single missing document, nobody knows for sure which ones they are, he said. Records are being tracked down and, when necessary, restored, by request. And four decades after the fire, requests for documents from the burned holdings or "B-Files" continue to roll in at the rate of 200 to 300 every day, O'Neill said. Some come from veterans needing a record of their service to receive federal health-care, home loans or other veterans' benefits, she said. A homeless veteran, for example, may need a copy of his or her DD-214 discharge certificate to qualify for Department of Veterans Affairs-sponsored shelters or meals. Sometimes requests come from veterans' families, needing the records to apply for entitlements on their loved one's behalf, or to have them buried in a national cemetery. In some cases, family members may need the records to qualify for scholarships or other benefits based on their family's military affiliation. Other requests also come from historians or genealogists trying to piece together their own family histories.

Fulfilling those requests can be as straightforward as tracking down one of the estimated 6.5 million records recovered from the fire, all now stored in temperature- and humidity-controlled conditions at the new National Personnel Records Center outside St. Louis. The effort can become slightly more difficult if it requires cross-referencing of other official records to ferret out and verify the information needed. In other cases, fulfilling a records request involves the painstaking and time-intensive process of reconstructing a document blackened by fire, soaked with water or tainted with mold. This is highly detailed work that O'Neill said demands both patience and a steady hand. In addition to a fulltime staff of 24, her team of technicians relies on the help of college interns eager to get hands-on experience in document preservation. Donning gloves to handle the fragile materials, they use special equipment and techniques to clean documents of debris and mold, separate pages stuck together for the past 40 years and piece together brittle fragments into more complete documents. State-of-the-art digital technology now helps them reconstruct documents once considered beyond repair, O'Neill said. "You can't reverse ash," she said. "But you can use scanners and digital software to enhance the document so the text on the burned part can be lifted and revealed. Basically, you look at a piece of ash, and when you digitally enhance it, you can see the writing on it." Regardless of what it takes, O'Neill said

she and her staff get tremendous gratification from their mission -- as preservationists, archivists and human beings. They delight in taking something badly damaged and making it, although not like new, better than most people could ever imagine possible, she said.

From the archival perspective, they enjoy reconstructing history, one document at a time. Since 1999, official military personnel records are now among the small percentage of government records now maintained permanently, based on their historical significance, she noted. But the biggest reward of the mission, she said, is being able to recover documents that can make a real difference in someone's life. "We are helping so many people in so many ways," she said. [Source: AFPS | Donna Miles | 2 Jul 2013 ++]

## **VSO Support**

By a vote of 387-1, the House of Representatives passed a bill that would allow veterans service organizations (VSOs) to obtain, at no cost, federal surplus property such as computers, vehicles and appliances. The Formerly Owned Resources for Veterans to Express Thanks for Service (FOR VETS) Act of 2013 (H.R.1171) was introduced last March by Rep. Dan Benishek (R-MI.) The legislation would amend Title 40 of the U.S. Code "to improve veterans service organizations access to Federal surplus personal property." American Legion National Commander James E. Koutz sent a letter 9JUL to Sen. Thomas Carper (D-DE) asking him to move the Senate version of the FOR VETS bill (S.573) forward so that it can be voted on before Congress recesses in August. Carper, an original co-sponsor of the Senate bill chairs the Senate Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs Committee, where the measure is being considered. In his letter, Koutz wrote that the bill would enable VSOs "to gain increased opportunities to Federal surplus property to educate, train, and improve the quality of life for veterans, their families, and communities in which they live." Rep. Mark Sanford (R-SC) was the sole member of the House to oppose the FOR VETS Act of 2013. A former governor of South Carolina, Sanford is an Air Force Reserve captain serving with the 315th Airlift Wing at Charleston Air Force Base. He won his House seat in a special election on May 7. [Source: American Legion Online Update 11 Jul 2013 ++]

## **VA Women Veterans Sourcebook**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) is developing a series of Sourcebooks addressing Women Veterans in the Veterans Health Administration. The Sourcebook is one result of ongoing VHA efforts aimed at understanding the effects of military service on women's lives. Volume 1, the first in the series titled Sociodemographic Characteristics and Use of VHA Care has been available for viewing on the internet at [http://www.va.gov/vhapublications/ViewPublication.asp?pub\\_ID=2455](http://www.va.gov/vhapublications/ViewPublication.asp?pub_ID=2455) for some time. It describes women Veterans receiving VHA care in Fiscal Year 2009 overall and within key subgroups (by age and by service-connected disability status). DVA has just released Volume 2 titled Sociodemographics and Use of VHA and Non-VA Care (Fee). Volume 2 is the second product of the collaboration between Woman Health Services (WHS) and VA Palo Alto Health Care System.

Following Sourcebook Volume 1, Volume 2 describes sociodemographic characteristics and health care utilization patterns of women Veteran patients in the VHA. Its primary purpose is to present data to inform policy and program planning as VHA implements and evaluates new ways of providing care to women Veterans. It updates Volume 1 with Fiscal Year 2010 (FY10) data on the number of women Veterans, their ages, service-connected disability status, and VHA outpatient utilization. In addition, it builds on the prior report by providing data about women residing in rural versus urban areas and by examining use of health care through VHA's "Non-VA Care (Fee)" system, which is comprised of services provided to Veterans by non-VHA providers but reimbursed through VHA. The 78-page publication is now available in PDF format at [http://www.womenshealth.va.gov/WOMENSHEALTH/docs/SourcebookVol2\\_508c\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.womenshealth.va.gov/WOMENSHEALTH/docs/SourcebookVol2_508c_FINAL.pdf). Some of the sociodemographics identified in Vol. 2 are:

- **Healthcare Usage:** The number of women VA healthcare nearly doubled over the past decade, from 175,698 in fiscal year 2001 to 316,903 in FY10. Women veterans now comprise 6% of VA patients. They also use outpatient care more than men.
- **Age Distribution:** A decade ago, the age distribution of women veterans showed two peaks, at ages 44 and 77. In FY10, a third peak appeared, at age 27. In FY10, 42% of women veteran patients were 18-44 years old, 45% were 45-64 years old, and 13% were older than 65.



- Residence: More women veterans resided in urban areas than rural areas in FY10 (urban 64%; rural 36%). [Source: VFW Washington Weekly 12 Jul 2013 ++]

## *Homeless Vets Update*

A panel of the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health was scheduled to take testimony 9 JUL on the Safe Housing for Homeless Veterans Act H.R.2065 which mandates that veterans' homeless shelters meet building safety and fire codes. Rep. David McKinley (R-WV) in May sponsored the bill with Rep. Grace Napolitano (D-CA) after seeing "with my own eyes" some of the unsafe conditions of shelters that receive a per diem fee from the Department of Veterans Affairs. "Unfortunately there is no law mandating homeless shelters that receive funding from the VA to meet code," said McKinley, who as a licensed engineer called it an egregious omission to exempt the shelters from local, state and federal safety codes.

Under the VA program, a shelter can get up to \$42 per day per housed veteran, according to the agency's website. The payments are part of the VA's Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program, aimed at helping homeless veterans or those at-risk of homelessness. In addition to the shelter per diem, organizations can also apply for grants to provide case management, education, crisis intervention and counseling, as well as services for specialized populations, including women vets. Mark Walker, deputy director for The American Legion's National Economic Division, said the problem is a national one and not limited to West Virginia. "There are issues when we talk about housing together on veterans who are at risk," he said. The VA program requires that the facilities be affordable and safe, "but there is an issue with the safety part of it." In addition to the VFW, the bill also has the backing of the Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, the Homeless Veterans Coalition, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, the International Code Council and the Fire Marshals' Association, according to McKinley.

Alex Nicholson, legislative director for IAVA, was expected to submit testimony for the record to the House panel. About a quarter of homeless people in America are veterans. "IAVA supports this bill because it aims to increase accountability for organizations entrusted with providing services to America's homeless

veterans, ensuring that these individuals are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve,” Nicholson says. VA Secretary Eric Shinseki vowed to end veteran homelessness by 2015, and has maintained – against the skepticism of members of Congress – that the VA is still on track to do that. In December, the VA reported that the number of homeless vets had dropped 7 percent from January 2011 to January 2012, when there were about 62,600 homeless vets on a single night’s count, according to the findings of the Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress. [Source: Military.com | Bryant Jordan | 9 Jul 2013 ++]

## ***VA Conference Scandal Update***

Stonewalling by the Department of Veterans Affairs over its lavish spending on a pair of training conferences in Orlando, Fla., triggered a subpoena 9 JUL from the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. VA spent at least \$6.1 million on the conferences in the summer of 2011, including as much as \$762,000 that was squandered on such things as a \$50,000 video parody of the movie "Patton" and \$72,000 for snacks. Committee Chairman Darrell Issa (R-CA) said he was personally assured by VA Secretary Eric Shinseki that the agency would cooperate with the congressional investigation into the conferences. Yet, agency officials have failed to deliver documents the committee has been seeking since AUG 2012.

Rep. Issa said in a statement late Tuesday, “It is unacceptable that Veterans Affairs still has not cooperated with the Committee's requests nearly a year after they were originally sent... After the personal assurances I received from Secretary Shinseki and the accommodations made by congressional investigators, there can be no excuse for the continued delay ... I am forced to use the compulsory process and am determined to find out just why and how taxpayer dollars were spent in such an indulgent and careless manner". The subpoena seeks all communications related to the conferences from 13 department officials, including Shinseki. Aside from failing to deliver the documents, VA officials have rarely returned phone calls from congressional investigators, according to a committee news release. Committee staff called and emailed the department 45 times, and most of those communications went unanswered. Yet despite repeated promises from VA that the documents would be delivered, and multiple deadline extensions from the committee, VA has failed to fully respond to requests for information.

The VA inspector general issued a report in October faulting the agency for excessive spending on the conferences. Some VA officials who helped plan the conferences accepted improper gratuities including free rooms and helicopter rides. The IG found accounting and spending controls were so lax that it was unable to determine the exact cost of the events. John Sepulveda, then the department's assistant secretary for human resources and administration, resigned the day before the IG report was made public. Issa's committee has been investigating improper conference spending for more than a year. In April 2012, the committee sent letters to 23 agencies, including VA, seeking detailed records of conference costs. In a 12 AUG letter to Shinseki, Issa specifically requested emails and other documents related to the Orlando conferences, as well as the names and titles of everyone who participated in planning the events. A VA spokeswoman did not respond to requests for comment. [Source: Washington Examiner | Mark Flatten | 9 Jul 2012 ++]

## **PTSD Update**

A new study shows that continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) may help veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) see a reduction in nightmares and sleep disturbances. According to study findings, this means that the number of nightmares fell significantly with CPAP use, and even reduced nightmare frequency after starting the treatments. "Patients with PTSD get more motivated to use CPAP once they get restful sleep without frequent nightmares, and their compliance improves" said principal investigator Sadeka Tamanna, MD, MPH, via a press release, the medical director of the Sleep Disorders Laboratory at G.V. (Sonny) VA Medical Center in Jackson, Miss. The study examined a retrospective review of medical records to identify OSA patients who also carried a PTSD diagnosis and who were treated in a VA medical center sleep clinic between May 2011 and May 2012. The number of nightmares per week before treatment and up to six months following CPAP treatments were extracted and treatment compliance was determined from CPAP memory cards.

"One out of six veterans suffers from PTSD, which affects their personal, social and productive life," said Tamanna, via the release. "Nightmares are one of the major symptoms that affect their daily life, and prevalence of OSA is also high among PTSD patients and can trigger their nightmares." According to the

American Academy of Sleep Medicine, obstructive sleep apnea is a common sleep illness affecting up to seven percent of men and five percent of women. It involves repetitive episodes of complete or partial upper airway obstruction occurring during sleep despite an ongoing effort to breathe. The most effective treatment option for OSA is CPAP, which helps keep the airway open by providing a stream of air through a mask that is worn during sleep. The National Center for PTSD of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs states that PTSD symptoms such as nightmares or flashbacks usually begin soon after a traumatic event, but may not appear in full force for months or years later. Symptoms that last longer than four weeks can cause great distress or interfere with daily life and may be a sign of PTSD if it is still undiagnosed. If you think you have PTSD or know someone that does, call 1-800-273-8255 at the Veterans Crisis Line. More findings for the study can be found online in the journal SLEEP at <http://www.journalsleep.org>. [Source: Science World Report | Kathleen Lees | 8 Jul 2013 ++]